



Children and Family Services
Training Center
Department of Social Work
University of North Dakota

Fostering Communications



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Building a Network of People in the Foster Care System

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Bullying

What is bullying?

Bullying occurs when a child or adolescent (or a group of children or adolescents) repeatedly harasses, intimidates, hits, or shuns a child who is weaker physically or has less social standing. While adults also can engage in bullying, this topic focuses on children.

Bullying involves repeated acts of verbal or physical aggression directed at children who are not able to defend themselves. An isolated fight between two children of similar size and social power is not bullying; neither is occasional teasing.

Both boys and girls engage in bullying, but it is more common among boys. It can take several forms.

Bullying can be physical (hitting, shoving, or taking money or belongings) or psychological (making threats, name calling, and excluding from conversations or activities).

Boys tend to use physical intimidation (hitting or threatening to hit) as well as verbal insults, and they often act one-on-one. Girls tend to bully in groups by shunning another girl or gossiping about her.

Children often are bullied through belittling comments about their appearance, such as being teased about being shorter, thinner, or heavier than other children or for the way they talk. Making fun of children's religion or race occurs far less frequently.

Bullying starts in elementary school and becomes most common in middle school; it lessens but does not go away in high school. It usually occurs in school areas that are not well supervised by teachers or other adults, such as on playgrounds, in lunch rooms, and in bathrooms.

How common is bullying?

Estimates of prevalence vary, but bullying is widespread around the world. In 1998, a United States survey of private and public school students in 6th through 10th grades found that 29.9% of children reported moderate or frequent involvement in bullying. Of these students, 13% had bullied others, 10.6% were bullied, and 6.3% fell into both categories.¹

A U.S. government study in 1999 reported that about 5% of

students ages 12 to 18 said they had been bullied in the previous 6 months.²

Why is it important to stop bullying?

Bullying erodes self-esteem and interferes with schooling for many children. Some students find excuses to stay home from school rather than face harassment. Although bullying is common, it is not normal behavior. It is a sign of poor psychological, emotional, and social development (often called psychosocial adjustment) and may lead to serious emotional and social difficulties for children on both sides of the problem. Children who are bullied suffer poor self-esteem and depression that may linger into adulthood; their schoolwork suffers, which lowers their self-esteem even more. Children who are bullied may be at risk of committing suicide or violence against others, while children who bully are at risk of committing criminal acts later in life.

Characteristics of Children Who Bully

Children who bully:^{1, 3}

- Are aggressive with others (including parents and teachers).
- Frequently hit or push other children.
- Are physically strong and socially dominant.
- Have a positive view of aggression.
- Have trouble following rules.
- Show little empathy for others.

Children do not bully because they are insecure and lack self-esteem. On the contrary, they think highly of themselves. They like being looked up to and tend to make friends easily. They often expect everyone to behave according to their wishes.

Some children both bully others and are bullied. These children, sometimes called "provocative victims," can be anxious and aggressive. They may have been bullied and then lash out at others. They may tease bullies, bringing on more aggression against themselves.

Bullying should be a "red flag" for parents, alerting them that their child has not learned to control aggression. The child

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and the family will need professional help.

Young people who bully are more likely than their nonbullying peers to smoke tobacco and drink alcohol; smoking is associated with bullying in middle-school youth, but not with bullying in high school.¹

Bullying children are at risk of committing criminal acts later in life. One study found that 60% of boys in grades 6 through 9 who bullied others had at least one criminal conviction by age 24, compared with 10% of boys who were not involved in bullying.³

Characteristics of Children Who Are Bullied

Children who are bullied tend to have certain characteristics that make them vulnerable to bullying. These children often are:^{1,3}

- Physically smaller and weaker than many of their peers.
- Emotionally sensitive.
- Socially withdrawn.
- Anxious and have poor self-esteem.
- Passive in dealing with others.

Children who have long-term (chronic) illness often fit this pattern.

Some children are bullied because they stutter when they speak, or they may start stuttering as a result of being bullied.

Despite these common characteristics, children who are bullied are not to blame for attacks against them. It is important for adults to make clear to children that it is not their fault when other children repeatedly say mean things to them or about them, or hit or intimidate them.

Girls are as likely as boys to be bullied. However, boys are more likely than girls to be bullied in grades 6 and 7.²

As stated above in *Characteristics of Children Who Bully* some children both bully others and are bullied.

In extreme situations, children who are bullied may commit suicide or lash out violently against those who bullied them. Several high-profile school shootings have been attributed to retaliation for bullying.^{1,3}

Children who are embarrassed about being bullied may not want to tell their parents or other adults about the abuse. Therefore, parents, teachers, school nurses, and family doctors should look for signs of bullying, which may include poor sleep, unexplained bruises, frequent crying, and making up excuses to not go to school.

Bullied elementary school children, especially those who are hit, may complain of frequent sore throats, colds, nausea, and poor appetite.⁴

How Children Can Discourage Bullying

Children can take steps to deter bullying. They can:

- Stay away from children who appear to not like them.
- Hang out with friendly kids at school.
- Role play with their parents or other adults on how to handle bullying kids.
- Play or take breaks near adults while at school.
- Walk to school with older brothers and sisters or

friends.

- Sit near the bus driver.
- Try to send nonverbal signals that they are confident and can take care of themselves, including standing straight, looking other children in the eye, and speaking firmly.

What Children Should Do if They Are Bullied

It's normal for children to be frightened or angry when other children harass them. But they can discourage attacks by showing confidence and not overreacting to bullying. Children should not fight with a bullying child or make verbal insults. This could lead to more aggression and possibly serious injury.

“Walk, talk, squawk”

Experts recommend a catchy expression to help children remember how to handle bullying: “Walk, talk, squawk.”³

Children should **walk** away from the bullying child or children.

They should **talk** to the child by looking him or her in the eye and saying strongly but calmly, “Leave me alone,” or “You don’t scare me.” Children who are being bullied should not run (even though they may want to) because this undermines their show of confidence and reinforces a feeling of power on the part of the bullying child.

After the encounter, children should **squawk** to adults about the episode. It might help for children to identify an adult at school to tell if incidents occur. The adult should be told that the child will come to him or her if harassed. Children not involved in bullying who see another child being harmed also should seek help from an adult immediately.

Children may worry about making other kids angry by telling on them, but exposing the abuse is the only way to stop the problem.

How Parents and Other Adults Can Help Stop Bullying

Children on both sides of bullying incidents need help.

Children who bully

In general, parents may spot signs of excessive aggression when their child is quite young. It is normal for young children to hit one another, but most can learn to control their aggression. Repeatedly hitting and biting other children, stealing, or cruelty to animals are signs that professional help is needed.⁵

Parents can look for other signs that their child is bullying; your child may come home from school with extra money or toys, books, or clothing that do not belong to him or her. You might overhear your child commenting cruelly about other kids or talking about excluding other children from activities. Girls especially bully in this way.

If this happens, ask questions to find out what is going on in your child’s life. He or she could be the target of a bullying child and passing on the harassment. Or, your child may not have grasped the importance of understanding the feelings of others (empathy). Parents can intervene with close supervision, rules, and by demonstrating sensitive behavior.

Children who show aggression need supervision and rules, but parents should not punish them physically, such as with corporal punishment.⁵ Physical punishment only reinforces the belief that people can get what they want through aggression.

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From the State Office

By Don Snyder, Foster Care Administrator

In North Dakota and on the national level, we recognize the important role of social workers in helping to maintain the connection between children in foster care and their biological parents. Equally, we recognize the importance of foster parents being able to work with the biological parents of children placed in their homes. These efforts are focused on the goal of establishing permanency for children. The following article addresses this issue.

Foster Families Working With Birth Families To Help Move Children To Timely Permanency

by Jane Elmore

(Reprinted with permission from the semi-annual newsletter of the National Resource Center for Foster Care and Permanency Planning at the Hunter College School of Social Work, Fall 2003.)

What is the goal of foster families working with birth families?

Permanency for the children as soon as possible is the goal. Working cooperatively with birth families can speed the process of permanency, not just for reunification, but for adoption as well. When foster families and birth families are working with the caseworker as part of a team to do what is best for the children, they have a common goal. The foster family is helping the birth family to be reunited with their children. If the birth family believes that everyone is helping them, but they can't be reunited with their children, it becomes easier for them to participate in making other permanency plans. Ideally, birth parents will be able to participate in developing a permanency plan for their child that includes surrendering their children for adoption, rather than going to court to terminate the parental rights.

The adults manage the relationships.

When the foster parents, birth parents, and caseworker don't work together, the child ends up in the middle "managing the relationships" between the adults. Think about the child who knows his birth parents and foster parents dislike each other, and maybe the caseworker doesn't like either one of them. The child must monitor what he says to any of them about any of the rest of them! What an untenable position to place any child in, but especially a child that has all the problems already forced on him by virtue of being a part of the child welfare system. If the adults work together with a strong sense of purpose to do what is best for the child - the child sees this, and he doesn't have the pressure of trying to manage the adults. The adults are in charge and they manage the relationships with the child, the foster family, the birth family, and the caseworker. Everyone wins, especially the child.

Is this approach for ALL foster families & birth families?

A decision must be made if this approach is to be used with every family whose children come into care, or if it will only be used with families that are open to the approach and can make good use of the added time and expertise of the foster parents. A similar decision needs to take place regarding foster parents. Will all foster parents be required to work extensively with birth parents? What about foster parents who just want to adopt? Will foster parents who provide these extra supports be compensated for their time, as opposed to just being reimbursed for expenses?

Will foster parents participating in this program be considered "professional foster parents," and be given special recognition, etc?

What does foster families working with birth families mean?

Denise Goodman talks about "Bridging the Gap." (See bibliography for contact information.) She has created a chart that demonstrates a continuum of behaviors. It can include indirect contact such as sending the child's report card with her and providing snacks on visits, to the birth family and foster family joining together to celebrate birthdays and holidays with the child. It can be a whole range of little things and big things that will change over time as the relationship develops. Sometimes foster parents even become advocates for the birth family. What may be most heartwarming for the foster parents who do this work is the appreciation of the children in their care.

When the foster parents go out of their way to be nice to their birth parents it means a lot to the child. Brenda Weber, a foster parent from Minnesota, who works with the National Resource Center for Special Needs Adoption, talks about one little boy she fostered thanking her "for being nice to my mom".

The ultimate example of foster parents working with the birth parents is what is called "Shared Family Care." It is when the birth family actually moves in with the foster family. The foster family mentors the birth family on everything from parenting to budgeting to meal preparation to apartment hunting to any number of other things. The birth family maintains responsibility for their children. Typically the birth family lives with the foster family for 3 to 6 months and the foster family continues to mentor the family after they move out and are living on their own. Birth families, foster families, and the caseworker working as a team is hard work for everyone.

The foster family may feel frightened, anxious and judgmental. The birth family may feel suspicious and resentful. The staff may feel threatened and fear they will lose "control" of the case.

How do we move all of these negative feelings to a positive, working relationship? How do we get birth parents, foster families, and the caseworker to focus on what is best for the child?

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Keys to Success

MUTUAL RESPECT
from everyone to everyone.

KNOWLEDGEABLE & EXPERIENCED caseworker.

OPEN DECISION MAKING.

Both birth parents and foster parents stressed that there should be no “premeetings where the real decisions are made.”

FOSTER PARENTS

are REALLY part of the team and all information is shared with them.

BIRTH FAMILIES

do not feel judged.

PROGRAMS ARE
INTENSE AND SHORT TERM,
generally 6 months or less.

NEEDED SERVICES

are in place.

Training Can Make It Happen!

What kind of training? The amount and kind of training to be developed depends on how intensively you want the families to work together, and current practice.

Derith McGann, Director of Foster and Adoption Services for Connecticut, who has been recognized for her work with foster families says “agencies need to decide if foster parents are really part of the team, or are they just contracted providers who should do as we say.” For many states, having foster parents work with birth parents in a significant way will be a major transition for staff and foster parents. This needs to be respected and addressed.

The approach of foster parents working with birth parents should be integrated into both the initial and ongoing foster parent training, and the initial and ongoing staff and supervisor training. If necessary, develop specialized training for already licensed foster parents and experienced staff. Train staff and foster parents together when possible.

Use foster parents, birth parents, and staff who have done this work successfully to assist with the training. Have them talk about how they came to be able to do this work and the value of it. Also ask those who have made mistakes and have learned from those mistakes to talk about their mistakes and what they could have done differently.

Have staff who have done this work successfully available to counsel and mentor other staff new to this approach. It is important for caseworkers to be comfortable and supportive of

the relationships between foster parents and birth parents as they develop. They must be able to provide assistance when there are the inevitable rough patches along the way.

Ensure everyone understands that the goal is to move children to permanency more quickly; not just reunification, but adoption as well. Stress the positive impact on the child of everyone working together.

Agenda for the Meeting:

The same general agenda will be used each time there is a “first meeting” between the foster parents, birth parents, and caseworker. The agenda needs to be very focused and child centered.

- Caseworker welcomes everyone and thanks them for coming. The rules of confidentiality are reviewed. Ground rules are discussed, such as treating everyone with respect, being honest, and that all decisions will be made openly.
- Caseworker invites the birth parents to talk about their children. This gives the birth parents the opportunity to share information with the foster family, such as the child’s food likes and dislikes, bedtimes, favorite toys, etc.
- Foster parents can ask questions, and share information about their family.
- Close the meeting by insuring that immediate and practical matters such as visits with the parents, doctors’ appointments, and counseling sessions are clarified.

You Are On Your Way!

Foster parents working with birth parents can be a positive experience for everyone, and is the most beneficial situation for the child. It will allow the child to move to permanency more quickly. It puts the adults, not the child, in the position of managing the relationships among the adults, and allows everyone to focus on meeting the best interests of the child.

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“Icebreaker” brochure and associated materials. Oregon Department of Human Services. Carolyn Krohn at carolyn.krohn@state.or.us

“F.O.C.U.S. Meeting Training Agenda”. Dawn Walker, Michigan Family Independence Agency at walker4@michigan.gov

“Tips on Promoting Birth Parent – Foster Parent Teams” from New York State Citizen’s Coalition for Children, Inc. at www.nyscc.org/linkfamily/Realities/caseworkertip.htm

“Bridging the Gap Between Resource Families and Birth Families” by Denise Goodman at DAGPhD@aol.com

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<http://www.cwla.org>

“Shared Family Care” from The National Resource Center for Abandoned Infants Resource Center at http://aia.berkeley.edu/projects/sfc/htm_2

Bullying

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Peer mediation often does not work because bullying involves children who have different levels of physical power and social status. Adults almost always need to intervene.

The American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry recommends that parents of children who bully seek help from their child's teacher, principal, school counselor, and pediatrician or family doctor. These professionals can help evaluate your child's behavior and make a referral to a child and adolescent psychiatrist, a psychologist, or a licensed counselor who can work with your child.

Children who are bullied

Parents may not be aware their child is being bullied, because children may be too embarrassed or afraid that a bullying child may make life worse for them. Parents can look for signs of bullying such as their child having frequent headaches or stomachaches and avoiding school or activities involving certain children. Parents also can ask their children questions about how other children treat them, whether they are teased or have to eat and play by themselves.

Parents can help bolster their children's self-esteem by encouraging positive social interaction with other children, including after-school activities. These activities may help children carry themselves with confidence, making them an unattractive target for children who bully. You can encourage children to:

- Not react to bullying comments or threats with physical aggression or taunting remarks.
- Practice role playing at home so they will know what to do when a bullying child confronts them. They should practice saying, "Leave me alone," and then walking away.
- Develop behaviors that show confidence rather than shyness and vulnerability. They can learn to look people in the eye and speak up when they talk.
- Hang out with socially adept peers from whom they can learn confident behavior.
- Engage in structured activities with adult supervision. This reduces the opportunity for bullying, which tends to occur away from adults.

Other Places To Get Help

Online Resources:

Colorado Anti-Bullying Project

<http://www.nobullies.org/> 1-866-662-8559 (1-866-NO-BULLY).

Committee for Children

<http://www.cfchildren.org/bully.html>

Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC)

2277 Research Blvd. MS 4M, Rockville, MD 20850

1-800-538-3742 accesseric@accesseric.org

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2. National Center for Education Statistics (2001). Nonfatal student victimization—student reports. *Indicators of School*

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3. Glew G, et al. (2000). Bullying: Children hurting children. *Pediatrics in Review*, 21(6): 183–189.

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Credits: Article taken from www.webMD.com, May 28, 2005.

President's Corner

By James Schnabel



Graduation time is here. If you have a high school graduate the NDFPA wants you to know that we have some scholarships that they may be eligible for. Also it is time to start thinking about your nominations for foster parents of the year, agency of the year, and social worker of the year.

In February, I had the opportunity to testify before the legislature regarding the foster care portion of the health and human services budget. We didn't get all the results we were hoping for but they did reinstate a portion of the funding. It was an experience to really sit down and evaluate. As a result of that evaluation time I came to the same conclusion that my wife and I had when we began foster care. Children are societies most precious asset, they have wants, needs and desires, they are tomorrows leader and laborers, they deserve respect and need to be nurtured. As foster parents we have a huge opportunity to influence future generations for the better. Hold your heads high and continue to fight the good fight.

NDFPA Awards

By Pam Terfehr



Each year, the North Dakota Foster Parents Association takes great pleasure in the presentation of the "Foster Parent of the Year," Social Worker of the Year" and "Agency of the Year" awards.

You are a special group of people who come together to protect the best interests of children and families. We would like to take this time to thank you for the work you do to serve the children of North Dakota. This is a difficult job, and yet, each and every one of you has made this commitment to work as a team to make our state a better place to be. You are all to be commended!

Please take the time to nominate someone who continuously goes "above and beyond" the realm of their duties. Please use the form enclosed in this newsletter.

The deadline for nominations will be August 15, 2005. Nominations should be sent to: Awards Committee; C/O Pam Terfehr; 5795 170th Ave. S.E.; Christine, ND 58015.

UPCOMING EVENTS

International Foster Care Organization Conference

Madison, Wisconsin will host the 14th biennial IFCO Conference August 7-13, 2005, at the Monona Terrace Convention Center. The theme is "To Honor the Child" (From Birth Through Independence). For more information, email to ifco2005@fostering.us or check the web site at www.fostering.us/ifco2005.

Train The Trainer

CFSTC will present another session of Foster/Adopt PRIDE Preservice training for trainers, August 23-25 at a site to be named later. Team leaders, current PRIDE trainers and social work agency staff will be recruiting new trainers for local teams.

NDFPA Executive Board

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